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RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON PRIORITY 2418
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RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 4898
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1040
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI PRIORITY 5644
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 002810

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: SOMCHAI WONGSAWAT ELECTED AS THAILAND'S NEXT PRIME
MINISTER, BUT FOR HOW LONG?

REF: A. BANGKOK 2800 (BANHARN PRAISES SOMCHAI)

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 2791 (PPP ENDORSES SOMCHAI)

[1](#)C. BANGKOK 2616 (RULINGS DELIVER BLOWS)

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) The House of Representatives elected Somchai Wongsawat as Thailand's next Prime Minister in a September 17 vote along partisan lines. Somchai received the support of his People's Power Party (PPP) and the other members of the governing coalition that had backed his predecessor, Samak Sundaravej, while Democrat Party (DP) legislators voted for DP Party Leader Abhisit Vejjajiva. Somchai received 298 votes, Abhisit received 163, and five MPs abstained. PM-elect Somchai will likely receive royal endorsement within a few days and be inaugurated with a cabinet of his choosing a few days after that.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment: The immediate problem that Somchai will face upon assuming office is what to do about the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), which remains illegally encamped at Government House, the formal seat of government, and continues to publicly reject the leadership of any PPP figure. In his current acting PM capacity, Somchai has authorized reconfiguration of Don Muang Airport facilities for temporary use by the Cabinet, and he appears unlikely to take a confrontational approach toward the PAD (see his biography, below). Not seen as a strong-willed personality, Somchai's ability to lead an administration, exert authority over the security forces, and maintain harmony in his increasingly factionalized party is unproven. With PPP facing possible dissolution by the Constitutional Court in the next six months (see ref C), few expect his administration to be long-lived even if Somchai proves capable. Somchai may lead Thailand into 2009, but his term could conceivably end before the new year. End Comment.

[1](#)3. (C) Legal processes involving Somchai's brother-in-law, former PM Thaksin Shinawatra, continued to move forward. With Thaksin remaining abroad in the U.K., the Supreme Court Justices presiding over his trial for abuse of power (in connection with his wife's purchase of real estate) on September 17 delayed rendering their verdict until October 21, giving Thaksin 30 days to appear voluntarily in court,

normal Thai legal procedure when defendants do not appear in person. The Supreme Court also issued another arrest warrant for Thaksin September 16, based on his failure to attend proceedings related to separate charges that Thaksin abused his power in connection with Thai Ex-Im Bank loans to Burma.

14. (C) Post offers the following biographic information on Somchai:

BEGIN BIOGRAPHY

SOMCHAI WONGSAWAT

(Phonetic: SOME-chai WOHNNG-sah-wat)

Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand

(U) The House of Representatives elected Somchai Wongsawat as Thailand's 34th Prime Minister on September 17, 2008. Somchai entered party politics with his appointment as a Deputy Leader of the People's Power Party (PPP) when the party was founded in mid-2007. He was elected to the House of Representatives in December 2007 on the PPP party list for Region One, which encompassed provinces in northern Thailand. Somchai served concurrently as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education under Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej from February until September 2008.

(U) Somchai began his career as an Associate Judge in the Ministry of Justice in 1974. In 1976, he began serving as a Judge on Chiang Mai's Provincial Court, then moved to Chiang

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Rai's Provincial Court in 1983. In 1986, he began serving as Chief Justice, first on Phang Nga's Provincial Court, then on the Rayong Juvenile Court (1987), the Chonburi Provincial Court (1988), the Nonthaburi Provincial Court (1989), and the Thonburi Criminal Court (1990). In 1993 he began serving as a Judge on a regional Court of Appeals; four years later, he became Chief Justice of another regional Court of Appeals.

(U) In 1998, Somchai became the Justice Ministry's Deputy Permanent Secretary for Academic Affairs. In 1999, he became Deputy PermSec for Administrative Affairs for a short time. In November 1999, he was elevated to the position of Permanent Secretary. Administrative restrictions on the length of service of a Permanent Secretary led to his transfer to the Labor Ministry, where he became Permanent Secretary in March 2006. He resigned in the aftermath of the September 2006 coup d'etat, which deposed his brother-in-law, then-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

(U) Somchai is married to Yaowapa Wongsawat, a younger sister of Thaksin who is widely seen as the faction leader for northern MPs in parties supportive of Thaksin. Yaowapa formerly served as a member of parliament and an executive of the Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT); she lost her political rights for a five-year period when the TRT was dissolved in May 2007 by the Constitutional Court but continues to wield influence within the PPP. The couple has two daughters, Chinnicha and Chayapa, and one son, Yotthanan. Chinnicha is a member of the House of Representatives, representing Chiang Mai province.

(U) Somchai was born on August 31, 1947. He graduated from Thammasat University's Faculty of Law in 1970 and from the National Defense College in 1996.

(C) Embassy interlocutors have found Somchai to have an unimposing presence. Many Thai politicians have publicly characterized him as "gentle" and soft-spoken. He appears moderately fluent in English.

END BIOGRAPHY

JOHN